



2012

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.21.06>

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Recommended Citation

D'Angelo, Lori (2012) "Finding Myself in Fiction," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*: Vol. 21 , Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.21.06>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol21/iss1/6>

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Finding Myself in Fiction

-Lori D'Angelo

"A blank page is mine enemy," my husband, Joseph, said. He had taken to speaking in Shakespearean English ever since his last book was rejected. I have to admit this was annoying. Worse than that though were his bad rewrites. From Hamlet: "To write or not to write, that is the question." Or from Romeo and Juliet: "Is a rejection letter by any other name just as sweet?" You see what I mean, you get the gist. In rejection, my husband had become insufferable. Before, when he was successful, his arrogance had been grating but tolerable. He was like William Hurt or Willem Dafoe. You can stand them in certain roles but not in others.

Failure was a role Joe did not wear well and, as I say this, I realize that I sound a little like Joe talking in overly pretentious English. One day, incensed, I told him that he was like Spenser who deliberately tried to sound like Chaucer. It annoys Joe sometimes that I am educated. Sometimes, I think Joe would like a submissive wife who bakes things for him and tells him how smart he is, even when he is acting like an ass. But he doesn't admit this to me. He doesn't even admit this to himself.

"Spenser was brilliant," Joe said in response to my criticism. But Joe doesn't think this. He never liked Spenser. He just wanted to start an argument. I didn't. I just wanted him to realize that his book getting rejected by fifteen publishers was not the end of the world. Even if his book never gets published, it is not the end of the world. He could write another one or he could not write another one. Either way, life would go on. But when you live with a writer who has once been successful, he becomes terrible when he is not.

"Yeah, you're right, Spenser was brilliant. Perhaps more brilliant than Shakespeare," I replied. He didn't agree with this statement, and I didn't believe it. But I said it because he had boxed himself into a corner by stating opinions that weren't his.

He knew this, and better yet, he knew that I knew it. He gave up. He said, "Diane, why can't you be more sensitive sometimes?"

I shrugged. I didn't tell him why. The reason was simple. He thinks he needs sensitivity but giving it to him only makes him delusional. He then begins to believe that his bad work is good. He wrote his best work, a novel that was both critically acclaimed and well-received by the public, during the fourth year of our marriage after my miscarriage when we were fighting like pit bulls, and the novel was semi-autobiographical. He wrote about himself and he wrote about me, and then he claimed that none of it was true. But people who knew us well knew he was lying. He wrote things that should have stayed between us, and I can't forgive him for that.

Joe liked to joke that his books are his babies, but the fact that we didn't have any children was tremendously painful, at least for me. I don't know if it was quite so painful for Joe. When I miscarried, that morning when he brought me back from the hospital and I stood there stunned because I felt like I'd been shot in the head, what Joe said to me was, "Pull yourself together, Diane. This happens to people all over the world, everyday." But it did not happen to me everyday. That was what I said, that's what I told him. And guess where that ended up? In his book. In his goddamn bestseller. The only consolation I had was that I came out looking like the more sympathetic character. My friend, Lois, says that most people would have divorced Joe for pulling a stunt like that. But I knew what I was getting myself into when I started dating a writer. He told me when we first got together who all his stories were about, which lovers and friends they were based on. Some of the people he wrote about weren't literary and didn't even know that they'd made it into his fiction. Early on in the relationship, he told me after sex, "I'm going to write about us, Diane. My best work is

going to be based on us." At the time, I was flattered. Even when Joe warned me, "Some of it might not be pretty. The best fiction usually isn't." But I'd laughed then, because, I thought, what do I have to worry about?

It's a startling experience to find yourself in fiction, especially when the fiction is well-written and the made-up details say more about you than the real ones ever possibly could and you realize that you can sometimes come off as a cold-hearted bitch. When I finished reading that book, the one that was a best-seller, Joe asked me, eagerly, as if he needed my approval, "What do you think, Diane?"

"It's honest," I said. That and nothing more.

"But what do you think it's going to do to our relationship?"

"I don't know," I said.

"But how could it be worse than what we've already done?" he responded. And he was right. We'd already treated each other like shit. I sometimes wondered if Joe treated me the way he did just so he could write about it later, about what an asshole he'd been. Of course, he'd change the names and the locations. Instead of writing about our lives in boring Ohio, our fights would be in exciting places like on Fifth Avenue in New York.

I sometimes teased him, "Why don't you make it the Empire State building?" "Too Deborah Kerr-Carey Grant," he replied dryly. He didn't miss much. He didn't ever miss much. Even now, when he was writing badly and acting like an ass, he didn't miss much. So it shouldn't have surprised me when he put the typewriter away — yes, he was writing with a typewriter even though there really was no reason for it unless it was sadistic, to torture his agent and his publisher who would then have to employ some flunky to retype the whole book on a computer — and asked me, "Diane, what's wrong?"

"Aside from your behavior?" I asked.

"Yes, aside from that."

So, I told him even though I didn't want to. "I think I might be pregnant again." All of my previous pregnancies had ended in miscarriages and horrible fights which led to brilliant stories for Joe. "And I don't want it to be like the others." By this, I meant I both didn't want to have a miscarriage and didn't want the miscarriage, if I had one, to end up in the pages of Joe's next novel.

"Have you been to the doctor?" Joe asked me.

"No," I said. I was afraid to go.

"Then how do you know?"

"I just know, okay?" I said, exasperated. In my head, I wondered if Joe was already storing up these lines in case it happened. "Do you want our baby to die again so you can write about it?" I asked.

"What a horrible thing to say," he said. But he didn't say no.

In the pantry, I took to canning goods. We owned a house in the country. One of Joe's crazy ideas to help him write. He had the money. He'd made a shitload off that bestseller about our screwed up marriage and how nasty we were to each other. Kind of like *The War of the Roses* but more contemporary. Also, unlike those people, we didn't get divorced. I'm not sure if that book was real or not. After a half an hour, Joe entered the pantry.

"What are you doing?" Joe asked me.

"Stockpiling for winter," I said.

"Diane."

"I don't know what I'm doing, okay, just like you don't know what you're doing with that shitty book."

"Thanks for being honest."

"No problem."

"I thought the pantry was merely decorative."

"At one time, it was used. And if I have this baby. . ." I began, afraid to hope.

"Maybe it'll work out this time," he said.

"Do you want it to?"

"Yes," he said, and I believed him.

During my fifth month, I was bitchy as hell. I had never made it that far before and didn't know what to expect. I didn't realize that pregnancy could get worse as it wore on. In the past, I had only gotten the first few months, kind of like an appetizer. My pregnancy made me manic and fervent. I began building igloos out of ice cubes in the kitchen. "Those are going to melt," Joe told me the first few times. After a while, he just gave up and cleaned up the puddles after I grew tired of the igloos.

I walked around the house playing with ice cubes and wearing inappropriate halter tops that showed off my pregnant belly. "You can see it now," I said triumphantly.

Joe was surprisingly tolerant. He didn't even try to stop me when I insisted on going out wearing clothes that made me look ridiculous and fat. I let my hair grow long and wore shirts that showed off my growing tummy and Joe was affectionate and loving, even in public. I re-read his book, the bestseller, and noticed things about the male character that I hadn't before. He had wanted to have a child too, just as much as the wife. But you wouldn't notice this unless you did a careful reading. I told him about it in bed while he was wearing his reading glasses and learning about serious academic things.

"I reread your novel," I said.

"Which one?" he asked half-attentive to me, half-reading some essay about the metaphysical poets.

"You know your magnum opus, the best-seller."

"Personally, I don't think it's my best work."

"No, it's good," I said. "You manage to convey things about the . . . male character, very subtly." I had decided that I would refer to his alter-ego as the male character.

"I think that's why the critics liked it. One of them called it heartbreakingly beautiful."

"I thought that it was just a bunch of BS at the time," I admitted.

"And now?" he asked as he put the academic book down on the nightstand.

"Now, I don't know." I hiked the halter top up so that my pregnant belly was fully exposed. Joe kissed it; then he kissed me. He kept on doing that, and we didn't speak.

I was eight months pregnant and had stopped wearing halter tops. By now all the ones I had didn't fit anymore anyway. But, in the evenings after I napped and Joe wrote, Joe liked to sit with me. He liked to rub my stomach and kiss it, and I let him because I didn't mind. I liked the affection. I liked that we could communicate without speaking. When we spoke, one or both of us was bound to say pompous things. But when we sat there together, it really was beautiful and I remembered why I had married him in the first place.

On the day I was going to give birth, I woke up and knew. I told Joe, "It's going to be today. We're really going to have a baby today."

Joe looked worried.

"If I was going to lose him, it would have been before now, don't you think?"

"I'm sure you're right," he said.

The birth was hell. I can see why some women stop after one. I can also see why some women never want to stop. Holding the baby after, even though I was tired and hurting all over, really was amazing. Before I drifted off to exhausted post-birth sleep, I asked Joe, "Will you write about this?" He didn't answer, but I already knew he would. I

wanted him to. When I'd called Lois, months before, and told her I was pregnant, she asked if I was crazy.

"Didn't the doctors say you might not be able to have kids?" she'd reminded me. I hated her for being so practical and reasonable. Now, I felt glorious and triumphant. Nothing I had done in my life to that point compared with the experience. I know that's 1950's housewifery of me to say, but I really felt that. I wondered how Joe felt. I wanted to call Lois and gloat. When I woke up, I asked Joe, "Do you think you'll love the baby better than your novel?" He didn't answer. I thought it was because he couldn't decide. Later, I realized that it was because he was recording it. I was helping him write his next novel. I would be in it. My character, wearing her halter tops and building igloos out of ice cubes, would come off as a little crazy. When Lois called and asked if any of that were true, I totally lied.

"This one's a little less autobiographical," I told her. She sounded doubtful. I could tell that even over the phone. But I didn't care. Joe's new novel was a bestseller. He had stopped speaking in bad Shakespearean English, and I was hugely pregnant again. This time, I was having a girl. Joe would write about it, I knew, but it wouldn't bother me because I was happy. Joe was happy too. You could tell that, despite the male character's cynicism, if you read his last book carefully.

SELF-PORTRAIT # 3: A DREAM

-Don Adams

It's like this:

I was in the store one day,
poking around, as it were,
when I grabbed a package of panty hose
and walked smack out the door,
only to be nabbed by the establishment's
crack security, who turned me over
(naturally) to the state.

So that I was in prison, then,
along with all of my old friends
(acquaintances, really)
from school. *So this*

is where you were all those years.

They did not seem at all surprised to see me,
but were rather amused (mildly)
that I — the great one — should end up,
after all, like them.

I thought, "When I stole the panty hose,
it was as in a dream,
and dream-logic demanded
that I be landed here,
with Clay Copeland, Pat O'Brien,
Gary McCarver and the rest,
where I am to be made to feel a bit awkward,
it would seem, at first."

Later it was brought home to me
that my mother's son is in the clink;
my throat clenched as I stared at the bars.
Then I concocted a plea for mercy,
like a threat, or poem,
addressed, dear
reader, to you.